At CIA, a Rebuilder 'Goes With the Flow'

Avoiding Intellectual Debate, Bush Focused on Agency Image

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In 1976, the American intelligence community was divided by a fierce debate over the Soviet Union's Backfire bomber. Was this aircraft a full-fledged intercontinental system threatening the United States, or a "theater" bomber usable only in Europe and Asia? It fell to George Bush, as director of the CIA, to attempt some kind of resolution of the question for the Ford administration.

Powerful forces were lined up on each side. Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger and senior CIA analysts didn't want to have to count the bomber as an intercontinental strategic weapon in arms control negotiations, and doubted that it was one. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld argued that because the Backfire could be refueled in flight, it could easily be used to attack the United States.

GEORGE BUSH: MAN AND POLITICIAN
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Confronted with these conflicting positions, Bush chose neither. "I won't take a view," Bush said, according to a senior CIA official at the time. "There will be two views." The intelligence report he forwarded to the president contained both.

It is common practice to include competing views in intelligence reports and estimates, but not common to avoid taking a position. Several former officials said that Bush didn't want to side with either the Kissinger or Rumsfeld group, and was not inclined to immerse himself in the details sufficiently to form his own position.

"He did not reveal himself, either emotionally or intellectually," the former CIA official said. This was one of many instances in which Bush equivocated, according to this former official, who was in charge of some of the most important intelligence matters in the U.S. government. Bush's predecessor at the Central Intelligence Agency, William E. Colby, and his successor, Stansfield Turner, "would get involved and underline, turn down corners of pages of estimate drafts and interagency intelligence papers . . . put marks and questions," according to this official, but "there was nothing from Bush."

This account of Bush's 356 days at the CIA is based on scores of interviews with officials in the intelligence community and the Ford administration; Bush declined to be interviewed. His approach to the Backfire problem, many of those interviewed said, was typical of his year as director of the agency. He was the first politician ever appointed to the job and he made few waves, avoided confrontations, and worked, as he has throughout his life, on building his relations with important people and groups.

Using these tactics Bush was able to restore agency morale after humiliating public investigations by two congressional committees, repair relations with Congress while rebuilding the agency's credibility, avoid new crises and win congressional approval for important technological advancements. At the agency Bush was appreciated both for these accomplishments and for a warm personal style that made him popular with the troops.

According to senior CIA and Ford administration officials who worked with Bush directly on intelligence issues, he rarely became intimately familiar with the issues his agency faced. Instead, colleagues said, he operated as a problem-solver, focusing on image and public relations and deferring on substantive matters to key officials in the White House, State Department and other agencies.

Carl Duckett, the CIA deputy for science and technology who was let go by Bush after three months but was closely involved in the analysis of Soviet weapons, said: "I never saw George feel he had to understand the depth of something . . . . [He] is not a man tremendously dedicated to a cause or ideas. He's not fervent. He goes with the flow, looking for how it will play politically."

Maurice Ernst, who headed the CIA's powerful office of economic research from 1970 to 1980, said, "George Bush doesn't like to get into the middle of an intellectual debate . . . he liked to delegate it." Ernst added, "I never really had a serious discussion with him on economics."

"It was an approach remarkably similar to what a younger, more active Ronald Reagan might have done," said one of Bush's former senior CIA aides.

Daniel J. Murphy was then a Navy admiral who served as Bush's deputy for the intelligence community and later became his vice presidential chief of staff. He said Bush's CIA record adds up to "effective leadership . . . . George Bush was given one of the monumental management problems of all time and he solved it, not always with a lot of flash, but he gets people in the room and works it out."

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In his public statements on his year at the CIA, Bush has consistently indicated that he loved the job and felt he did it well. His colleagues at the time confirm his great enthusiasm for his agency work.

Two officials recalled arriving at an important meeting in the summer of 1976 to find a man sitting in a chair off to the side of the main conference table. He had red hair, a prominent nose and thick glasses. This man they did not recognize rose and said, "Good afternoon."

The voice was familiar, but not the face. "I'm sweating under this thing," said the man, pulling off a well-fitting wig, false nose and glasses. It was Bush testing an agency disguise that someone had given him for his 52nd birthday on June 12. "He was like a little boy with a new toy," said one of the officials.

Emphasis on Public Relations

Bush inherited a profoundly demoralized CIA. The agency had just come through a period of intense public scrutiny and humiliation. Investigations conducted by Rep. Otis Pike (D-N.Y.) and Sen. Frank Church (D-Idaho) had documented CIA assassination plots against foreign leaders, spying on American citizens and other questionable covert actions.

"Bush's sole function, perhaps, was to get rid of the bad taste," said one of his former senior analysts who is critical of Bush's failure to engage in the intellectual debate on major intelligence issues. "He did a great job" with Congress, this official added, noting Bush's previous service in the House. "No one could have done better. He was one of them."

Several former officials said Bush signaled his concerns on his first full day on the job as director, Feb. 2, 1976, when he lunched with Tully Plesser, head of a polling firm that had worked for Bush's unsuccessful 1970 Senate race and for the Republican National Committee. Bush wanted Plesser to take a national survey about public attitudes toward the CIA, according to two sources.

Later that day Bush was advised by one of his deputies that such a move would be a disaster. His first act should not be an opinion survey; it would reinforce the worst fears that Bush, who until a year before was chairman of the Republican National Committee, was too much a partisan politician to credibly head the nation's intelligence agencies.

Bush dropped the idea of a poll, but his schedule during his first month shows that he continued to emphasize public relations. On Feb. 4, his third full day as director of central intelligence (DCI), he went to New York. He met with executives of The New York Times, made a stop at the Waldorf to see old friends on the staff (he had lived there during his tour as U.N. ambassador), paid his respects to the managers of the 21 Club, lunched with executives from CBS, and finally stopped at the exclusive Links Club.

On Feb. 19, 1976, he was back in New York to see editors of the Daily News, The Wall Street Journal, Newsweek and Women's Wear Daily; on Feb. 23 he again traveled to New York, to see a senior editor of Time magazine; on Feb. 25, he lunched with the publisher of The Washington Star.

During that same month, an executive order laying out new rules to govern operations of the government's intelligence agencies was being drafted and published by President Gerald R. Ford. Though Bush participated in some of the discussions on the order, officials said he played a minor role, letting others settle the basic issues.

Bush testified dozens of times before various committees of Congress. According to a former CIA official involved in those appearances, a number of them were limited to greeting the members and introducing a topic. Then, by arrangement with his staff, Bush would be handed a note saying he was required at the White House, and would excuse himself, allowing agency experts to continue the testimony for the CIA.

As director Bush gave unusual confidential briefings to the boards of directors of at least three New York companies, according to officials. Bush and another CIA official gave a luncheon briefing that included forecasts on the world energy situation to the Wall Street investment firm Brown Brothers, Harriman and Co., where Bush's late father had been a partner, the officials said. (A spokesman for Brown Brothers said there was no record of Bush's visit.) On another occasion Bush met with the board of directors of Chase Manhattan Bank.

Numerous CIA colleagues recalled Bush's disinclination to get involved in substantive issues. Hans Heymann Jr., who was Bush's national intelligence officer for economics, said that when they first met, he expressed delight that Bush had majored in economics at Yale, where he was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. Heymann recalled Bush's response: "He looked at me in horror and said, 'I don't remember a thing. It was so long ago, so I'm going to have to rely on you.' "

In some cases Bush's failure to deal with substance was involuntary. According to Murphy, Henry Kissinger denied Bush access to some sensitive material. "The top cables coming into Kissinger with the highest classification that contained critical intelligence were not being given to the DCI," Murphy said in a recent interview. "There were promises, promises, promises but [Kissinger] largely ignored us," Murphy said.

"Bush tried desperately to get them . . . [and] would go see Kissinger on this, go over there specifically on this. It was supposedly solved and then it was not solved . . . . It was criminal that the DCI was not getting them . . . but Bush did not go to the president on it," Murphy said.

'Call Me George'

According to Heymann and others, Bush's willingness to delegate responsibility and rely on the expertise of others made him extraordinarily popular at the CIA. "After a few weeks at the CIA, Bush had them eating out of his hand. He had 18,000 votes in the building," said one official.

Many of those interviewed recalled the kindness Bush displayed in personal encounters. Before Bush was confirmed he set up a temporary office in the Old Executive Office Building to receive briefings about his new job. One senior official recalled an early exchange with Bush: "I said, 'Would you like to be called Mr. Director or Mr. Ambassador?' and [Bush] replied, 'Most people call me George.' And so that's what we did."

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Another remembered going to Bush's house on many Sunday afternoons to prepare him for early Monday briefings to be given to Ford at the White House.

"[The Sunday plan] would begin on Thursday and Bush would apologize all over the place and say, 'I'm going to have to interrupt your Sunday, I'm terribly sorry.' . . . We'd go out there to Bush's house and at the door he would apologize again and then Barbara Bush would come in and offer drinks and say how nice it was for us to come out . . . and how they had to apologize for interrupting our Sunday. And then at the end of the briefing we would leave and Bush would, you guessed it, give us our fourth apology."

Not all of Bush's decisions were applauded by associates, however. One that was poorly received was his choice of E. Henry Knoche as the agency's deputy director.

Knoche, a personable, tennis-playing giant of a man, struck many of his colleagues as being a lot like George Bush—concerned more with human relations than substance. It was a surprising appointment. Knoche had no experience in the operations directorate and had held no senior post on the analytic or scientific sides of the agency; he had spent his CIA career on the edges of the agency's basic mission. At the time Bush picked him he was working outside the headquarters building as deputy for the intelligence community staff. Even Murphy said the Knoche appointment was "not well received."

One senior agency official saw in the Knoche appointment a flaw in Bush's general mode of operations. "He's the proverbial nice guy," this intelligence professional said. "He's not discriminating enough in selecting his subordinates. He picks people he would like to associate with socially . . . . [He] selects on the basis of compatibility, not capability."

In his autobiography, Bush writes that Knoche was "widely respected by his colleagues as a professional with hands-on knowledge." Knoche speaks warmly of Bush as a quick learner and pragmatic, effective manager whose open and direct dealings allowed him to leave the agency with no skeletons in the closet. "He brought us out of our travails," Knoche said.

One intelligence operation conducted jointly with another country went astray under Bush, according to Scott D. Breckinridge, then the agency's deputy inspector general. The eavesdropping effort had begun to target American citizens, Breckinridge said, but was turned off when this was discovered.

A mystery about Bush and the agency arose in interviews about the period after he had left it. According to those involved in Bush's first political action committee, there were several occasions in 1978-79, when Bush was living in Houston and traveling the country in his first run for the presidency, that he set aside periods of up to 24 hours and told aides he had to fly to Washington for a secret meeting of former CIA directors. Bush told his aides that he could not divulge his whereabouts, and that he would not be reachable.

But according to former directors and other senior CIA officials, there were no meetings of former directors during that period, and Bush had no assignments of any kind from the CIA. Said Stansfield Turner, CIA director from 1977 to 1981: "I never knew former directors had meetings and there were none when I was there."

Asked about this, Bush spokesman Stephen Hart said yesterday that he had checked with those who handled Bush's schedule at the time, and they "recall no CIA activity of any kind." Hart said they did remember Bush taking off "personal time in Washington" for "tennis, visits with friends and dinners."

Clearing the Air With the 'B-Team'

Perhaps the best-publicized episode in Bush's tenure at the CIA was the "B-Team" affair, an occasion when Bush went against the wishes of career officials to satisfy prominent conservatives on the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board (PFIAB), a body of private citizens whose role was to keep a skeptical eye on the intelligence agencies.

In 1975 the PFIAB recommended that outside experts with pessimistic views of Soviet intentions be brought into the agency to dispute the analysis of its career experts on the Soviet military. Colby, then CIA director, declined this suggestion, but in 1976, Bush accepted it.

"It was a challenge to an institution [the CIA] and it was clearly political, and it was anti-intellectual," said one former CIA senior official. Another said that the result of the outsiders' B-Team analysis was foreordained, and the intelligence community was already set up to accommodate a range of views.

Several key former officials said that Bush went along because he wanted to mollify the PFIAB, a body that met regularly with Ford. Its members then included Clare Boothe Luce, two retired senior military officers and four chief executive officers of major corporations.

Richard Pipes, a Harvard professor of history who headed the B-Team, said that the B-Team essentially caused the strategic estimate to be more pessimistic—"realistic," in his word—a position strongly disputed by analysts who worked on the topics within the CIA.

After some details of the B-Team's conclusions leaked to the news media, Bush privately deemed the experiment a mistake, and wrote a letter to Ford asserting that the B-Team conclusions had no real impact on the final strategic assessment sent to the White House at the end of 1976, officials said.

Interviews with many of those involved suggest that Bush tiptoed successfully through this mine field, leaving everyone involved feeling unbruised. Both the career analysts on the A-Team and Pipes and his B-Team felt they had prevailed.

"Bush did it to clear the air," his former deputy Murphy said, describing the A-Team, B-Team episode as "wheel spinning." It was "an example of Bush biting the bullet, and it neutralized the outside bitching," Murphy said.

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One of the most significant developments during Bush's tenure was the addition of $500 million to the intelligence budget for satellite projects, signals intelligence systems and research on some of the most important intelligence capabilities in use today. This was possible in part because of a $400 million annual saving from a planned phase-out of older photo-reconnaissance satellites that dropped film back to Earth, which were to be replaced by the KH11 satellite system that would beam high-quality telephotos directly to ground stations.

Included in the new budget was $250 million for research and development of two satellite systems that would employ radar imaging so the equivalent of reconnaissance photos could be obtained through darkness and clouds. There was also $100 million for four ground stations to intercept other countries' communications. Another $150 million was included for sensitive satellite and Navy projects for intercepting communications. All of this hardware has served the agency well, according to past and present CIA officials.

Several former officials said that during his one-year tenure at the agency, Bush postponed action on some difficult issues that his successor, Stansfield Turner, later had to face. Among them:

- In the spring of 1976, on the eve of his resignation as deputy director for operations, William E. Nelson wrote Bush a memo about the future of the directorate, which is responsible for covert operations. "There were a lot of people in the DO who were marginal performers," Nelson said in a recent interview. "The low middle. We needed quality, not quantity. I told him that the lower 25 percent should be identified and should be encouraged to seek other employment . . . . I said we owed these people a lot but not a lifetime job. He [Bush] put it in his pocket and said he would think about it." There was broad consensus within the agency that such a cutback was justified but Bush took no action. The following year Turner began to eliminate 820 positions in the directorate, firing a handful of experienced operatives—moves that are still held against Turner at the agency.
- Allegations about the activities of renegade former CIA operative Edwin P. Wilson first surfaced internally during Bush's time, but no action was taken. Turner eventually fired two CIA employees who had assisted Wilson, and later Wilson was convicted of a wide range of illegal activities.
- Bush's general counsel, Anthony A. Lapham, made a formal report to the Intelligence Oversight Board, set up by Ford to monitor CIA activities, concerning possible impropriety in the secret payment of about $750,000 a year to King Hussein of Jordan. Bush took no action and only after the secret payments were disclosed in The Washington Post did President Jimmy Carter terminate them in 1977.

When Carter defeated Gerald Ford in November 1976, just nine months after Bush had arrived at the CIA, Bush's career was once again at the mercy of other politicians' electoral fortunes. Bush wanted to stay on at the agency—"desperately," according to one of his closest former associates. On Nov. 19, Bush visited Carter in Plains, Ga.

Knoche, Bush's CIA deputy, who accompanied him to Plains, recalled that "Bush offered to stay on a short-time, transitional period. He was a little shocked that there was no interest in that" on Carter's part.

Robert A. Mosbacher, a longtime Bush friend from Texas and the current finance chairman of the Bush presidential campaign, said in an interview that Bush went further and told Carter, "If I stay on, I won't run in 1980" for president.

But Carter wasn't interested. A week later Bush announced that he would resign on Jan. 20, 1977, the day Carter was inaugurated.

Staff researcher William F. Powers Jr. contributed to this report.

NEXT: Bush's finances.